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Soviets Allude to Breakdown of CSCE Review Conference

The Soviet Union last week raised the possibility that the Belgrade meeting could break down over disagreements over the agenda for the fall Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) review conference. During the June 23 session, chief Soviet delegate Vorontsov attacked the Western participants' "frivolous and cavalier attitude," warning that it could result in "unpleasant consequences" and the "failure of our mission."

Vorontsov made his surprisingly sharp remarks while arguing for an agenda proposal which Western observers believe would minimize scrutiny of Soviet and East European compliance with human rights measures in the Final Act. The Soviets are seeking an agenda which will bury any review of prior compliance with "third basket" provisions among general items dealing with future proposals for expanding East-West detente, whereas the Western participants are insisting that there be some division between review and new proposals.

While many Western diplomats were reportedly alarmed at Vorontsov's outburst, they subsequently interpreted it as a Soviet negotiating ploy aimed at pushing through Moscow's proposal. This would be consistent with the Soviet tactic of attempting to isolate the US by making some Western allies and neutral countries nervous over the prospect of a superpower confrontation over human rights. The Belgrade meeting is still in its early stages, and the Soviets evidently believe that they can gain some ground now by occasionally adopting a tough uncompromising line in negotiating details for the fall conference.

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The Present Soviet Line Toward the US

It is clear that the Soviets are making a determined effort to silence their foreign and domestic critics. These efforts include an intensified and relatively successful campaign of repression against the Soviet dissident movement, steps to isolate and intimidate foreign observers of the Soviet scene, and attempts to depict Western criticism of the abuse of civil and personal liberties in the Soviet Union as akin to subversion. The Soviets have been particularly hard on President Carter, whom they regard as the chief inspirer of such criticism. At the same time, their readiness to attack the President on this issue has been greatly strengthened by the existence of major difficulties with the US over collateral issues, particularly SALT. The net result has been a gradual increase in the bluntness and shrillness of Soviet warnings that a continuation of the US emphasis on human rights threatens to undermine East-West detente.

There appear to be two parallel motives behind the increasing harshness of Moscow's handling of its dissidents and the growing vitriol of its attacks on Western critics.

- First, the Soviet leaders appear to be concerned that without such a counteroffensive, foreign support for domestic dissidents could conceivably turn an irritating problem into a threat to the Soviet system, and an even more serious threat to regimes in Eastern Europe. This perception would appear to be exaggerated, but it nonetheless seems to be widely held by Soviet officials.
- Secondly, the Soviets seem determined to react pugnaciously to Western use of an issue which has placed the Soviet Union on the propaganda defensive outside as well as inside its own borders.

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Recent Incidents

Recent weeks have provided some striking examples of the current thrust of Soviet policy. These include:

- Official intimations in early June that the arrested dissident spokesman Anatoly Shcharansky might face trial on treason charges, which under law carry a possible death penalty.
- The temporary detention and interrogation in mid-June of American newsman Robert Toth on charges that he had engaged in the illegal "collection of information of a political and military character."
- General Secretary Brezhnev's warning in an interview published in *Le Monde* on 16 June that "ideological struggle" must not be permitted to grow into a "psychological war" which could produce a catastrophic "political and military confrontation." Brezhnev did not directly specify the target of his remarks in the interview, but [REDACTED] he made it clear that his admonitions were framed with President Carter in mind.

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The Precedents

These three developments represent an intensification of an ongoing campaign rather than a qualitative change in Soviet attitudes and positions. According to the reckoning of the US embassy in Moscow, the stepped-up anti-dissident campaign has been under way since last fall. In the intervening months, the majority of the established dissident leaders have been silenced through expulsion, imprisonment, or domestic exile. Similarly, the charge that the activities of the Western press were illegal and tantamount to espionage has been made repeatedly in the Soviet press over the past months. (An AP reporter was expelled in January, the first such case since 1970.) In early March, such charges of illegality

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were extended to those members of the US embassy who maintain contact with dissident circles, and who, along with Western journalists, serve as the dissidents' main link to the outside world.

As for the fine distinction drawn by Brezhnev between "ideological struggle" and "psychological warfare," he was echoing a line already well established in the Soviet press and by Soviet diplomats. It first surfaced in authoritative fashion in the policy address delivered by Party Secretary Zimyanin for the anniversary of Lenin's birth in April. Brezhnev evidently felt it advisable to voice this distinction to the French in view of his well-publicized rejection of Giscard's suggestion that detente be extended to the ideological sphere. Brezhnev therefore now felt obliged to contend that ideological struggle as practiced by the East was legitimate, but as recently practiced by the West was not. While using slightly more moderate language than recent Soviet propaganda, and while vigorously reasserting continued faith in and desire for detente, Brezhnev nevertheless suggested that the Western practitioners of "psychological warfare" were endangering detente.

The New Increment to the Soviet Campaign

Despite the precedents, the most recent Soviet moves do represent a turn of the screw in Moscow's efforts to put its critics under pressure. If the Soviets carry through with their threats against Shcharansky, he would be the first dissident leader to be tried on charges of such gravity under the Brezhnev regime. Similarly, Toth was the first Western journalist since the beginning of the human rights controversy to be subjected to police interrogation and the implicit threat of trial and imprisonment. As for Brezhnev's remarks to *Le Monde*, they mark the first time he has publicly lent his personal prestige to the charges of "psychological warfare."

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